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*Chairman's Address*

1942

ORIGIN AND HISTORY  
OF THE ASSOCIATION

BY

NOWELL SMITH

August 1942



## THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE ASSOCIATION

THE address to which I have the honour of inviting your friendly attention is, as you know, a substitute for the Presidential Address customary at our Annual Meeting; but it is a substitute which makes no pretence to any sort of equivalence or, indeed, similarity of character to our customary Presidential Addresses. These have been literary disquisitions—on Style—on the Genius of English Poetry—on Modernism in Poetry—to name some of the more recent; or, more rarely, on some particular literary figure or monument—on ~~The Prelude~~—on Christopher Smart. And if ‘the blind Fury with th’ abhorrèd shears’ had not robbed us of our President this year, we should certainly have been listening to a Presidential Address of our traditional literary type, i.e. on some essentially literary topic, though as distinguished as any of the best of the series by the personal qualities of the author. For, as those who knew him best agree, one of the most marked characteristics of George Gordon was the infectious pleasure which he took in exercising his power to charm and enliven an audience with wit, with learning lightly borne, with an air of good fellowship in the company of the Muses. *Dis aliter visum!* And upon me fell the responsibility of proposing to our Executive Committee some course of action suitable to our disappointed hopes and feasible in the limiting conditions of war-time. This address is the outcome: not an eloquent disquisition on some literary topic, but a plain and brief account of the origin and history of our Association, leading up to some reflections which I sincerely hope may be of some interest and use to those of us—and that surely means all of us—who have the welfare of the Association at heart.

Now there was one exception to the customary scope of our Presidential Addresses, when in 1928 Sir Henry Newbolt, who had been Chairman of the Executive Committee in 1918 to 1920, took as his theme ‘The Idea of an English Association’. This was when the Association had just come of age and was appropriately the subject of discourse. Newbolt’s theme was a reminder of that of the celebrated *Report on the Teaching of English* in which he had so leading a hand seven years before, viz. the necessity in the interest of national unity of a liberal education for all English children, based on the national language and literature. He hardly touched on the history of our Association, and his brief reference to its origin and purpose was curiously unhistorical and coloured by

the theme that was in possession of his mind. Fortunately for me, there is abundant evidence both for the origins and the history in minutes and reports, and, still more fortunately, we still have with us Dr. Boas and Sir Philip Hartog, who were among the actual founders, to correct me if I go astray.

The actual originator of the movement which led very rapidly to the formation of the Association was Mr. E. S. Valentine, Head of the English Department of Dundee High School and external examiner in English in the Universities of Glasgow and St. Andrews. His circular letter of 15 January 1906 to four well-known men of letters, Beeching, Bradley, Stopford Brooke, and J. W. Hales, starts with 'the want of a Society to foster the study of English and the teaching of that subject in our schools'. The object was to be twofold; on the one hand to place English on the map as a substantive subject of the curriculum with teachers conscious of the aims and importance of the study; on the other hand 'the dissemination of right ideas on the teaching of English'. The proposed Association 'should be', wrote Mr. Valentine, 'a society with many branches in close affiliation with a central body, and one able to keep its members in touch with what is freshest and best in this special department of educational work'.

The first replies to Mr. Valentine were not very encouraging, none of the four writers being prepared to take an active part, though subsequently Prof. A. C. Bradley was better than his word. At the moment, however, Bradley did indirectly open an important avenue in naming Prof. Elton, among others, whom he advised Mr. Valentine to consult; for Elton, though, like the others, pleading inability to take an active part, showed the proposals to Mr. G. E. S. Coxhead, English master at Liverpool Collegiate School, who at once took them up in a thoroughly practical way by inquiries among fellow-teachers which elicited favourable replies and by co-operating with Valentine in laying definite proposals before a small preliminary meeting at Liverpool.

This in turn led to a public meeting at the University of London in South Kensington on 28 April 1906, summoned by a letter signed by fifty-six conveners—a remarkably rapid result of Mr. Valentine's action of 15 January. This letter, quoted by Dr. Boas in his 'Coming of Age' article in *The Times* of 28 April 1927, ran thus:

It is proposed to form an Association, whose aims shall be to foster and develop the study of English as an essential element in our national education; to determine the relative importance of its various branches; to encourage a high standard of scholarship in the teaching of our



literature and language; to discuss methods and the interrelation of school and university work; and to afford opportunities for friendly intercourse and co-operation amongst all who love our literature and language, and desire to spread a knowledge of them.

The arrangements for this meeting were made by Sir Philip, then Mr. Hartog, who also steered it through an awkward channel in which the project of an English Association might have 'suffered a sea-change' into that of an English section of the Modern Languages Association (founded in 1893)—a course favoured by Sir Frank, then Dr. Heath, Director of Special Inquiries and Reports at the Board of Education and a leading spirit in the M.L.A. After Mr. Hartog had proposed the formation of an 'English Language and Literature Association', Dr. Heath proposed and Mr. Storr, editor of the *Journal of Education*, seconded an amendment to adjourn the meeting after setting up a Committee to confer with the M.L.A. The amendment was lost by 29 votes to 25, and the original motion was unanimously adopted in the form 'that there be, and is hereby, formed an Association of persons interested in the teaching of English'. In view of the voting on the amendment Mr. Hartog very wisely proposed that 'the meeting be adjourned to a date to be fixed by an interim Committee to be appointed for this purpose and for the purpose of reporting to the adjourned meeting the views of the minority'. This was carried unanimously and on the Committee accordingly set up were, among others, Mr. Hartog, Prof. Boas, Mr. Coxhead, Mr. Valentine, Dr. Heath, Prof. Gollancz, with Prof. Bradley (co-opted). These shaped the resolutions which were adopted at the adjourned meeting on 7 July 1906, at which the English Association was actually constituted.

I hope it will not bore you if I now read you the Objects and Methods of the Association as unanimously adopted on the motion of Prof. Gollancz, seconded by Prof. Bradley.

I. The objects of the Association are (a) to afford opportunities for intercourse and co-operation amongst all those interested in English Language and Literature; (b) to help to maintain the correct use of English, spoken and written; (c) to promote the due recognition of English as an essential element in the national education; (d) to discuss methods of teaching English, and the correlation of School and University work; (e) to encourage and facilitate advanced study in English Language and Literature.

II. Meetings will be held to further these objects, and reports of the proceedings will be circulated among the members of the Association. Papers and leaflets supplying information or suggestions concerning the teaching and study of English will be published by the Association.

III. The formation of local branches, or the recognition of local societies as branches, is one of the chief methods by which the Association seeks to carry out its objects. Such branches will be required to contribute to the Central Fund. They will organize their own affairs, and will elect representatives to the Central Committee.

IV. The Association is in favour of establishing relations with kindred bodies with a view to co-operation.

I have gone into this detail with regard to the birth of the Association because I think it is of great interest and importance to see how far the growth of the Society has corresponded with the aims of its founders. In order to do this I need not go into nearly so much detail in the history; indeed, it would be quite impossible in the time at my disposal, to say nothing of your powers of endurance. What I think you will agree stands out as the motive power at the start was the desire—as I have said—to put English studies on the map of English school education. This was clearly the main object of the two schoolmasters who took the initiative and is equally clear in the letter of the conveners of the meeting, which founded the Association. And this was, I think, without doubt the great work which the Association did in its early years, culminating or at any rate proclaiming itself most impressively in the *Report on the Teaching of English in England* of the Departmental Committee appointed in 1919 by Mr. Fisher, as President of the Board of Education, to inquire into the position of English in the educational system of England. Of the fourteen members of that Committee, nine were members of the English Association, including Sir Henry Newbolt who was Chairman of both bodies, John Bailey, ex-chairman of the Association, and Dr. Boas.

How much direct effect the activities of the Association had on the attitude of Education Authorities and the teaching profession towards English Language and Literature in the educational system it is impossible to say. But I think it is safe to say that the greatest effect was indirect and came from the prestige of the Association in cultured and influential circles in London and the provinces and also overseas. There was, as I shall point out, a subtle danger in this path to success; but the path was evidently the right one, and it opened itself from the beginning. You will notice that from the first the tendency is to widen the scope of the Association and to enlist the leadership of well-known University professors, famous men of letters, and public men of literary distinction. I do not at all minimize the strictly educational work done by members of the Association in early days, both individually

by pamphlets and in Committees. But what did most to put English on the educational map was, I cannot doubt, the Annual Meeting in London, and that not because of the business it transacted, but because of the distinguished names of its President and the speakers at the banquet which followed the Presidential Address. This and the literary quality of our pamphlets, the literary lectures given up and down the country, the social amenities enjoyed on these occasions—all this gave an effectiveness to our more specific educational propaganda which its own intrinsic worth would not have secured. And this of course is the normal way of advancing good causes by means of social lubrication. *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci.*

However this may be, no one could question the energy and enthusiasm with which the Association was built up by its earliest officers, committee members, and other helpers, among whom in addition to those already named may be mentioned Gregory Foster, Provost of University College, London, and Arthur Acland, as chairman of committees—indeed Arthur Acland gallantly stepped into any breach and at one time, I believe, held all the offices together—Sidney Lee and J. H. Fowler, both eminently useful pamphleteers, Percy Simpson, and Jenkyn Thomas; and to these must certainly be added Elizabeth Lee, who was administrative secretary from 1908 to 1912, and A. V. Houghton, who succeeded her and, as we all gratefully remember, was our devoted secretary for twenty-six years.

The first General Meeting was held in January 1907 with Sidney Lee in the chair. At this meeting the constitution was adopted, Gregory Foster was elected Chairman of the Executive Committee, Valentine Hon. Treasurer, Prof. Boas Hon. Secretary, Coxhead Hon. Secretary for Branch business. Montagu Butler, Master of Trinity, was elected the first President of the Association and he presided over the second General Meeting on 10 January 1908. At this meeting it was reported that almost 1,000 members had been enrolled within a little more than a year; and the number grew pretty steadily till the war of 1914, when it had reached about 2,000. That war, like this one, though not to the same extent, diminished membership. It is remarkable that the Association did not drop below 1,700. And it began to recover numbers in 1918, in which year it was our Committee which took the initiative in suggesting to the President of the Board of Education the appointment of the Departmental Committee to which I have already referred.

But the most remarkable achievement of the Association during

the war, and indeed the greatest success with the general public during the whole course of our history, was the publication of that handy and inexpensive volume called *Poems of To-day*, which appeared first in August 1915, was in its 13th edition in 1917, its 35th in 1927, its 52nd in 1938—the last year for which I have the figure. It was a garland culled by many hands, but the final selection, the arrangement, and the telling Prefatory Note were almost wholly due to the fine judgement and care of Sir E. K. Chambers.

After the war the course of the Association seemed to be set fair. Numbers rose steadily. In 1922 they were about 5,000, and the Committee began to talk of aiming at a membership of at least 10,000, 'that the Association may become truly representative and self-supporting'. In 1925 they hoped to reach this mark, 'at least 10,000, before the Association reaches its twenty-fifth year of existence in 1931'. In point of fact it did reach its peak of something over 7,000 in 1927, when it celebrated its coming of age at the Annual Dinner with the Prime Minister, Mr. Baldwin, in the Presidential Chair. At that dinner the Presidents and Secretaries of some nineteen Branches were guests, and Mr. J. C. Squire, then Chairman of the Executive, proposing a toast in their honour said: 'We who work in the London office know that as far as the English Association is concerned, the Branches are the most important part of the tree.' This was perhaps rather the language of compliment than of strict veracity. I will not engage in the dangerous game of analysing a metaphor or an analogy. It is enough to say that the relations of the Branches to the Central Body have in this, as I believe in every association of a similar kind, been a matter of vital importance and at the same time of continuous difficulty to handle successfully; and I am sure that it cannot be said that our Association has solved the difficulty. Whether the officers and committees of the Central Body and of the Branches, and particularly the Executive Committee, could have pursued a more successful policy is a question which can be discussed, usefully I think, though without coming to any decided conclusion. At any rate, it has not infrequently been discussed. Even before the last war, in May 1914, there was a conference between some of the Executive (John Bailey in the chair) and five representatives of Branches, because, whereas membership of the Central Body had increased by 100 in the previous two years, that of the Branches had decreased by about 150.

It is interesting to note that John Bailey at that conference stressed the desirability of going outside the ranks of teachers for

membership. No one would doubt this desirability. Now, as then, it is most desirable, not only in order to increase the number of members, but also to break down the wall of partition between teachers as a class and the rest of the community. And the study and enjoyment of English Literature is obviously ground on which the professional teacher and the layman can most easily be brought together for their common pleasure and profit. But at the same time there is an overwhelming practical reason why the support of the teaching profession has always been essential for the permanent success and vigour of the Association. The original impetus came from the felt need of some powerful movement to put, as I have said, English on the educational map and to help teachers of English to reach and maintain standards equal to the best already established in other subjects. And in the early years the educational aims of the Association were kept well in the foreground. The minute-books are full of committees and sub-committees actively engaged upon such matters as examinations, grammatical terminology, methods of teaching, conferences with other educational bodies; and a large proportion of the long series of pamphlets, which many of us thought were the very best products of the Association, dealt with definitely educational topics. I do not think there can be any doubt but that the Association did a great work for English education.

Gradually—or perhaps not so gradually—the balance shifted; and while the claim of the Association to maintain a high standard in its own literature and scholarship was fully justified by pamphlets and essays by highly qualified and often highly distinguished authors, and also by that admirable series inaugurated by Sidney Lee and carried on so devotedly down to our own time by Dr. Boas, *The Year's Work in English Studies*—while this is true and I hope will always remain so, I do not think it can be gainsaid that from about the time of the last war the attention paid by the Executive and the leaders of the Association to the work among and for the teachers in the schools tended to relax. It was as if the publication of that *Report on the Teaching of English* in 1921 was so fine a flower as to exhaust the tree planted by Valentine and Coxhead in 1906. If that sounds fanciful, I think there is no doubt but that one serious check to the growth of the Association was the very success of its early work. Helped, no doubt, by a general tendency, of which it was itself a symptom or product, the Association played its part in the notable expansion of English studies in schools and universities that marked the early years of this century. Nobody could say now that English was off the map of English

education; and if the Association is to make a real appeal to the interest of school and university teachers, it needs to justify its existence, showing that a great deal remains to be done, and will always remain to be done, chiefly, though not entirely, through the schools, to enable us and our successors to enter with full intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual profit into the inheritance of our language and literature.

As I said just now, we reached our highest figure of membership in the year of our coming of age. It was immediately after the celebration of that birthday that membership began to decline; at first (1928-9) only in the Branches, but soon (1930) in the Central Body too. You will of course note at once that this decline was contemporaneous with the great economic and financial slump, which turned out to be the immediate cause of the world-shaking catastrophe in which we are now involved. The slump is indeed quite sufficient to account for the decline in membership. It is not unreasonable even to congratulate our Association, only born in 1906, on having survived the first World War, the great World Slump, and three years of the second World War—so long as self-congratulation does not lure us into complacency. There was certainly no conscious complacency on the part of the Executive Committee of those years. But I think there may have been somewhat of a false sense of security induced by the great success of *Poems of To-day* and the considerable success of other publications, and a tendency to rely on the profits of such publications to offset the fall of revenue from membership. And, at any rate, the interest of the Association did still tend towards general literary activities and catering for the general public rather than towards its original main purpose of supporting and assisting the cause of English studies and English teaching in the schools. Let me repeat that I am not depreciating the general literary interest, but only regretting the ebbing of the tide of educational interest. It is surely symptomatic that whereas for many years the Association habitually held an educational conference in connexion with its Annual Meeting, as well as on a number of other occasions, the Annual Conference was dropped for the first time in 1929, when a performance by the Citizen House Players of Bath was substituted. From that time conferences ceased to be a regular part of our programme. I have only found a record of one subsequent conference, in 1934, on Libraries; and, curiously enough, no mention is made of that in the Annual Report for that year.

In 1935 the financial position caused such grave anxiety that

special steps were undertaken in the hope of revivifying the Association, the general effect of which was to confirm the trend away from the original predominantly practical and educational aims to what I may call perhaps the more popular diffusion of literary culture. The pamphlets and bulletins disappeared and their place was taken by our present Magazine *English*; sherry-parties for poetry readings were instituted; our pleasant office and library in Cromwell Road were opened; the subscription was raised from 7s. 6d. to 10s. 6d. I do not propose to discuss these changes now; I merely record them. There was a meeting on 2 October 1937 at which they were discussed with some Branch representatives, of which I find a passing mention in the Annual Report; and I remember a conference at Bedford College on 6 May 1939, at which, in discussing the Spens Report, there was considerable criticism on the part especially of university teachers of the change from pamphlets to a magazine. As a matter of history I am afraid it cannot be said that these changes have appreciably arrested the decline in membership; but the rapid worsening of the political situation, followed by the outbreak of war, precludes our attaching too much importance to whatever views we may have held about them.

Having described what I cannot but regard as the failure of the Association to maintain and develop its early efforts to establish itself as a powerful organ of the teachers of English throughout the country, I ought to mention that since the adoption of the new measures of 1935 the Executive Committee have tried to re-establish active collaboration with the schools, partly by the constitution of a Schools Sub-Committee specially charged with that task and partly, on the spirited initiative of Mrs. Hodgson, by the establishment of some 130 Junior Branches in secondary schools. This latter experiment was cruelly cut down by the frost of war; we must hope that it will put out new shoots in the new spring-tide of English education towards which so many wistful eyes are turned.

The only other outstanding event in the history of our Association in these recent years was the retirement of Mr. Houghton from the Secretaryship in 1938 after twenty-six years of devoted service. It has been a great pleasure to the officers and such other members of the Association as have the opportunity of frequenting the Office to find that Mr. Houghton's retirement has not been followed by a complete severance from his old friends and colleagues. As an Honorary Life-Member he continues to take a lively and benevolent interest in our proceedings. Of his

successor, Mrs. Fielding, I will add nothing to what has been said in the Annual Report which you have received and adopted this afternoon.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I have done. I shall not be disappointed if you receive this address with the comment, expressed or silent, 'We are not amused'. It has not been my purpose to amuse; rather, like Kent, 'it is my occupation to be plain'. This is, for causes in other respects wholly lamentable, the loss of our President and the oppressive atmosphere of one of the gravest crises of this war, not the festive celebration which used to crown our annual labours, but quite simply the annual business meeting of the Association; and I make no apology for directing your thoughts entirely to the aims and purposes of the Association, to its history and to its prospects. I hope that before we part this afternoon some of you will contribute to the discussion of these subjects. We all know that while the war lasts we cannot launch out into expansive, or expensive, enterprises; but it is equally certain, that in a time of great spiritual tension ideas often find readier reception in our minds than in times of greater ease and comfort; and if there is a future for our Association in the building up of our social and spiritual commonwealth after the war, we cannot be too early or too earnest in trying to see what that future should be and how we can best plan to shape it.













